

MELODIC COMPOSITION & IMPROVISATION

Introduction

Although sometimes thought to be intuitive and therefore intangible, melody writing is in large part a craft. Some long-held rules are applied to melody, for example having clear shape and a single high point.

Melodic composition

Melodies in the common practice era and beyond are made up of two elements: scales and arpeggios. Scales may be of any length and arpeggios may outline any chord.

The majority of notes in a melody are usually *chord tones* (notes that correspond with one of the notes found in the simultaneously-sounding chord). Melodies will also have a few *nonchord tones* (notes that do not correspond with any of the notes found in the simultaneously-sounding chord).

Melodies tend to be balanced, in that motion in one direction (by leap or step) is usually complimented by motion in the opposite direction.

Successful melodies...

- are unified and balanced; they use few elements, and no notes, intervals, or rhythms should be unique to only one part of the melody
 - Unifying devices can include:
 - the use of motifs: intervallic or rhythmic
 - sequences
 - inverting fragments
 - establishing a connection between strong/accented notes across a longer span of time
- have moments of motion and moments of relaxation (cadences)
- show a clear direction and shape

Melodies often fail if they...

- are static around one or two notes
- contain large, unresolved leaps (a resolved leap means immediately stepping in the opposite direction of the leap: leap up, step down; leap down, step up)
- have consecutive large leaps that make the line too angular
- have one or more elements that seem to be unrelated to the rest

Definitions

Motive (motif)

A motive (sometimes referred to in the French: *motif*) is a melodic fragment that is repeated or varied to form a full melody, theme, or phrase. It is the smallest building block upon which themes and melodies are composed. Motives are established by continued use; a group of notes that is not repeated is not a motive.

The end of a motive is marked by either 1) its immediate repetition, 2) a rest, or 3) contrasting material. Usually, the repetition of a motive immediately follows its first appearance. Occasionally, contrasting material may forestall the repetition.

Melody vs. Theme

The word **melody** has a broad definition, and can be applied to any horizontal group of notes that appear in the foreground that make a complete thought (the "tune"). We usually speak of melodies having duration of at least several seconds, with shorter groups of notes referred to as melodic fragments or motives (see below). A **theme** is an open-ended melody - one which is not complete in itself and so used to form larger sections of a piece of music.

Melodic Improvisation

Conventional melodic improvisation follows very similar, but less restrictive procedures as outlined above. In a traditional jazz context, scales and arpeggios are applied to the chord changes of a jazz tune.

Scales

(For now, this discussion will avoid the topic of "modes").

A simple way to apply scalar improvisation to a song is to look for groups of chords that form a unit (like a ii V I) and then apply the scale associated with that unit. For example:

If you encounter the chords |Bbmaj7 Gm7|Cm7 F7| within a song, these four chords can be associated with the key of Bb major | I vi | ii V |. It is then possible to apply the notes of a Bb major scale (in a hopefully "interesting" manner!) as these chords go by.

Later (or earlier) in the song, a different collection of chords might form a unit pertaining to a different major or minor key, let's say: |Cm7 Abmaj7|Dm7b5 G7|. These four chords relate to the | I VI | ii V | of C minor, so similarly the C minor scale could be applied over these chord changes.

In the event where a single chord cannot be grouped within a larger unit of chords, the specific quality of that chord can be used to associate it with the ii, V or I(i) of a key. For example, if the single chord is a:

- Gm7: this could be thought of as the i of G minor, so a G minor scale could be applied.
 - Alternatively, it could be thought of as the ii of F major, so an F major scale could be applied (again, the topic of "modes" is being avoided for now...)
- Cm7b5: this could be thought of as the ii of Bb minor, so a Bb minor scale could be applied
- Fmaj7: could be thought of as the I of F major, so an F major scale could be applied
- D7: could be thought of as the V of G major, so a G major scale could be applied

Arpeggios

If the same chordal passage from above |Bbmaj7 Gm7|Cm7 F7| is encountered, one could apply the arpeggio (ascending or descending) to each chord:

Bbmaj7:	Bb-D-F-A	} ...or just a fraction of these notes
Gm7:	G-Bb-D-F	
Cm7:	C-Eb-G-Bb	
F7:	F-A-C-Eb	

Furthermore, even when a chord is just listed as a "7th" chord, the 9th, 11th and 13th notes (just added 3rds above the 7th) could be incorporated into the arpeggio (the 9th is in bold font):

Bbmaj7:	Bb-D-F-A- C
Gm7:	G-Bb-D-F- A
Cm7:	C-Eb-G-Bb- D
F7:	F-A-C-Eb- G

Mixtures

More realistically, a mixture of scales and arpeggios will be applied to a given unit of chords (or even a single chord, depending on how long it lasts). In the following passage (a ii V I in the key of F major), all notes are in the scale of F major and the circled notes are chord tones for each specific chord (which makes them part of that chord's arpeggio):

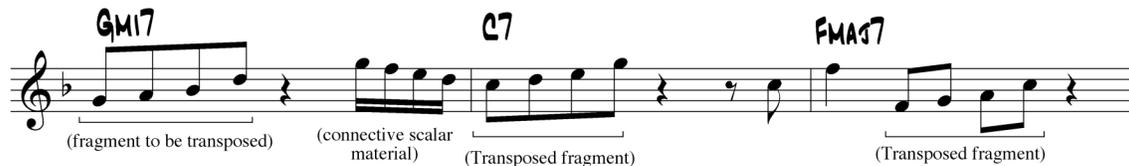


This example contains a mixture of scale and arpeggio patterns, incorporates multiple changes of direction, has moments of relaxation/space, and even has a "resolved" leap in the second measure.

Rhythm, Ordering and Space

The most elusive part of applying basic improvisation is what to do with rhythm and ordering of pitches. There are no exact answers, since the combinations are endless.

Often, rhythm and pitch patterns are used in a motivic (sequential/transposed) manner to obtain a sense of continuity. Such patterns and motifs can be intermingled with less "patterned" lines so that the sense of a pattern is not too obvious.



Here the initial pattern/motif is reused twice, with some unrelated (scalar) material and rests (space) in between to break up the potential monotony.